

Birth Narratives in the *Homeric Hymns*

Despite their immortality, it is not uncommon within Greek mythology to hear about the births of the gods. In the *Theogony*, Hesiod recounts the births of many gods from the creation of the cosmos to the Olympian pantheon. Stories of unusual births abound throughout his text. Gods are born from the severed genitals of Uranus (Aphrodite). They are swallowed and then reborn through vomiting (Zeus and his siblings). They are removed from Zeus' body (Athena and Dionysus). Many of these births defy the limits of human reproduction. And yet even these births are described in a straightforward manner, using simple Greek verbs (τίττω and γείνομαι). In the *Homeric Hymns*, however, we have the births of two gods described in much more detail—Apollo and Hermes. These two births are not notable for any sort of miraculous or unusual birthing process. Rather they are memorable because these two gods are in fact born in a seemingly regular and human way.

In this paper, I will address how these birth narratives are constructed within the *Hymns*. By examining how the stories of their births reflect medical knowledge in ancient Greece and how they do not, I will demonstrate how the authors of these *Hymns* confirm the Olympian hierarchy and Zeus' insurmountable position as ruler. The juxtaposition of a human-like birth with the possession of divine abilities supports the underlying intention of the *Homeric Hymns*, as has been identified by Jenny Strauss Clay in *Politics of Olympus: Form and meaning in the major Homeric Hymns* (1989). The longer *Homeric Hymns*, which includes these to Apollo and Hermes and also those to Demeter and to Aphrodite, work to complete the mythological canon of ancient Greece. They describe the honors and dominions of other Olympians, while reinforcing the established hierarchy with Zeus at the top. Because of the violent and patricidal succession myths which precede Zeus' rise to power, the threat of children, especially sons, overthrowing

their father is a serious fear. However, the use of the birth narratives in the *Hymn to Apollo* and the *Hymn to Hermes* allows for the establishment of these two gods as formidable within the pantheon without threatening their father. The combination of their human-like births and their rapid maturation and precocious behavior allows for both Apollo and Hermes to enter the world as powerful, yet deferential sons.

The descriptions of Leto and Maia giving birth reflect the concepts developed in Hippocratic obstetrics. The verbs *τίκτω* and *γείνομαι* and the noun *τόκος* are frequently used to describe the birth process in the Hippocratic corpus. It is not the vocabulary, however, that is most striking in this comparison; rather, it is how these poetic texts reflect the general medical understanding of the birth process. For example, in *On the Nature of the Child*, the Hippocratic author explains how labor progresses (29-31). His description affords the child an active role in its own birth. The child forces its way out of the mother by breaking the internal membranes (30). Both Apollo and Hermes play an active role in their own births. Each god is describing as leaping (*ἔθορε; θόρε*) out of their respective mothers (*Homeric Hymn to Apollo* 119; *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* 20). Unlike human infants, however, the divine babies in the *Hymns* continue their active roles outside of the womb. They cease their helpless infantile ways very quickly, demonstrating a divine precociousness.

In conclusion, it is the juxtaposition of their human-like birth with divine abilities that allow both Apollo and Hermes to establish themselves in the Olympian pantheon as powerful deities, who are nonetheless deferential to their powerful father. Consequently, they can be recognized as important gods without threatening the established divine order of the cosmos.

Work Cited

Clay, Jenny Strauss, *Politics of Olympus: Form and meaning in the major Homeric Hymns*
(Princeton, 1989).